



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Linguistics

Citation for published version:

Joseph, J 2017, Linguistics. in M Bevir (ed.), *Modernism in the Social Sciences: Anglo-American Exchanges, c.1918–1980*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 182-201.
<https://doi.org/20.500.11820/616fb51e-11cd-424f-9b82-fe563234689e>,
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316795514.008>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[20.500.11820/616fb51e-11cd-424f-9b82-fe563234689e](https://doi.org/20.500.11820/616fb51e-11cd-424f-9b82-fe563234689e)
[10.1017/9781316795514.008](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316795514.008)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Modernism in the Social Sciences

Publisher Rights Statement:

This material has been published in *Modernism and the Social Sciences: Anglo-American Exchanges, c.1918–1980*, edited by Mark Bevir. This version is free to view and download for personal use only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works.
©Cambridge University Press 2017.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Linguistics

John E. Joseph
University of Edinburgh

1 Modernity and modernism in the study of language

Linguistics, like sociology, wears its modernity on its name tag. The term *Linguistik* is first attested in German in the eighteenth century, then in French as *linguistique* (1812), and in English as *linguistics* in 1837,¹ but it took decades to catch on as the designation of an academic field. Most of the early attestations come from American publications, including the writings of the man who is in some respects the first “modern” linguist, William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894), in the 1860s and 1870s.² In institutional terms, the Société de Linguistique de Paris was founded in 1864,³ but university chairs in linguistics were slow to be established in France or any other country. The Linguistic Society of America was founded in 1924, almost seventy years after its French counterpart, and it would take another thirty-five years for the founding of the Linguistic Association of Great Britain in 1959. Linguistics was particularly slow to develop in countries such as the UK where language study remained strongly rooted in the older tradition of philology.

What distinguished linguistics from earlier approaches? No single criterion, but a constellation. Unlike philology, it was not bound up with the interpretation of classical or medieval texts; unlike etymology, its principal concern was not the origin of particular words; unlike the *grammaire générale* tradition of seventeenth and eighteenth century France (later to be revived by Noam Chomsky), it was not linked to enquiries into logic; unlike the pedagogical grammar tradition it was not aimed directly at the teaching of the standard language or of classical or modern foreign languages. At the same time, the proponents of modern linguistics did not cut their ties with these more venerable enterprises, but instead asserted dominion over them, based on a claim of scientific authority. This they staked largely on redefining their object of study as the language conceived as a self-contained system, which they approached without value judgements about what aspects of it might be reckoned good or bad.⁴

¹ See James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 146, who gives the first English attestation as from 1839, being unaware of Anon., “History of Navigation in the South Seas” (review), *North American Review*, vol. 45, no. 97, Oct. 1837, 361-390.

² See William Dwight Whitney, *Language and the Study of Language: Twelve Lectures on the Principles of Linguistic Science* (New York: C. Scribner & Co.; London: Trübner, 1867), *The Life and Growth of Language: An Outline of Linguistic Science* (New York: D. C. Appleton & Co; London: Henry S. King, 1875); Stephen G. Alter, *William Dwight Whitney and the Science of Language* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); John E. Joseph, *From Whitney to Chomsky: Essays in the History of American Linguistics* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2002).

³ Two earlier Sociétés de Linguistique had been founded, one in 1837 about which little is known, and a second in 1854, headed by Casimir Henricy and disbanded in 1860.

⁴ For every instance of usage purported to be bad, because illogical, a linguist will cite examples from a range of the world’s languages in which the same structure is treated as perfectly logical. The double negative, for example, is scorned as illogical in English (*I don’t have nothing*), but is the only way to form a negative sentence in Italian (*Non ho niente*). To challenge linguists on this would be to paint oneself into the pre-modernist corner of having to assert absurdly that Italians, as a people, are illogical.

Methodologically modern linguistics was to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and by the 1950s the consensus among its practitioners was that “All languages are equally complex.”⁵ This is the sort of dogmatic assertion that not only defies empirical investigation into its veracity, but would close investigation down altogether. Its rise becomes understandable when we look back to how commonly authors of accounts of “exotic” languages from the sixteenth until the early twentieth century treated structures that differed from the familiar Indo-European ones as fundamentally illogical. Either the exotic structure appeared more economical than that of the European languages, in which case the language and its speakers were labelled as underdeveloped, or the structure codified some distinction which European grammars do not make, in which case the languages and their speakers were described as quaint at best, and at worst, wasteful of mental energy. Either served to characterize them as primitive and inferior.⁶

If rejecting such beliefs, while reorienting attention away from many of the areas covered by traditional philology and adopting a rigorous form of systematic analysis, stamped linguistics with methodological modernism early on, it took another century for forms of aesthetic modernism to mark the field.⁷ This happened principally through reactions to the vision of language set forth in the *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*), published in 1916, based on three courses of lectures given by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) between 1907 and 1911.⁸

2 Dramatis personae

The *Cours* had its distribution limited by shipping disruptions caused by the Great War. Apart from Russia, where it was picked up quickly by the Formalists, including the young Roman Jakobson (1896-1982),⁹ only after the publication of its second edition in 1922 did it become the cornerstone of an enduring modernism in the study of language, in both continental Europe and the USA.

The UK resisted. Britain had already undergone its methodologically modernist turn in the study of language with the work of the phoneticians Henry Sweet (1845-1912), a reader at Oxford, and Daniel Jones (1881-1967), who in 1921 was appointed to a Chair of Phonetics in the University of London.

⁵ See John E. Joseph & Frederick J. Newmeyer, “‘All Languages Are Equally Complex’: The Rise and Fall of a Consensus,” *Historiographia Linguistica* 39/3 (2012), 341-368.

⁶ See Matthew Lauzon, *Signs of Light: French and British Theories of Linguistic Communication, 1648-1789* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁷ On the manifold problems of the “modern” see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), and John E. Joseph, “The Wolf in Itself: The Uses of Enchantment in the Development of Modern Linguistics,” *The Making of the Humanities, Vol. 3: The Modern Humanities*, ed. by Rens Bod, Jaap Maat & Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 81-95.

⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*. Publié par Charles Bally & Albert Sechehaye avec la collaboration d’Albert Riedlinger (Paris & Lausanne: Payot, 1916). 2nd ed. 1922; annotated ed. by Tullio De Mauro, 1972, critical ed. by Rudolf Engler 1967-74. English trans., *Course in General Linguistics*, by Wade Baskin, New York: Philosophical Library, 1959; another by Roy Harris, London: Duckworth; La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1983.

⁹ See Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, NJ & London: Princeton University Press, 1974); John E. Joseph, Nigel Love, & Talbot J. Taylor, “Jakobson and Structuralism,” Chap. 2 (pp. 17-28) of *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II: The Western Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001).

As discussed below, one of Saussure's fundamental concepts became central to Jones's work, but as a phonetician his interest was limited to the sound level of language. Two of the lecturers whom he hired were however more devoted Saussureans: Harold E. Palmer (1877-1949), a practitioner of what would later be called applied linguistics;¹⁰ and later, J. R. Firth (1890-1960), destined to become the most important British linguist of the twentieth century. At Cambridge, meanwhile, notice was taken of the *Cours* by two rather marginal figures, C. K. Ogden (1889-1957) and I. A. Richards (1893-1979), but only in order to reject its approach out of hand, for reasons to be explained below.

In the USA, on the other hand, the *Cours* seemed to be of a kindred spirit with the distributional method developed for the analysis of American Indian languages by the German émigré anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) and published in its definitive form in 1911.¹¹ It was well received both by Edward Sapir (1884-1939), the first among Boas's linguistic students, and Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949), who came from the historical linguistics tradition.¹² Bloomfield would go on to do his own fieldwork on American Indian languages, and he and Sapir would establish themselves as the pre-eminent American linguists of the interwar period. Each published a widely-read book with the title *Language*, Sapir in 1921, Bloomfield in 1933.¹³ Of all the books on linguistics published in the English language, Bloomfield's *Language* had, until the 1960s (and arguably beyond) the best claim to being definitive. Bloomfield himself would say in a letter to one of his students that Saussure's influence was to be found "on every page."¹⁴

I have now introduced my protagonists in the Anglo-American exchanges: Jones and Firth, Bloomfield and Sapir; and the two principal antagonists, Ogden and Richards. There remains to be mentioned the Anglo-Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942), who wrote an appendix to Ogden and Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning*.¹⁵ Hovering over all, like Old Hamlet, is the Genevese ghost of Ferdinand de Saussure.

¹⁰ See H. E. Palmer, *The Principles of Language-Study* (London: Harrap, 1921), p. 78; Richard Smith, "Harold E. Palmer's Alternative 'Applied Linguistics'," *Histoire-Épistémologie-Langage* 33/1 (2011), 53-67.

¹¹ Franz Boas, *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, Part I (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 40; Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1911). See also Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1998); and on the separation between British and American linguistics in the period just before the one treated in this paper, Julie Tetel Andresen, *Linguistics in America 1769-1924* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), especially pp. 1-10.

¹² From this same tradition had hailed Leonard's uncle Maurice Bloomfield (1855-1928), who had studied alongside Saussure at Leipzig and later served as first president of the Linguistic Society of America.

¹³ Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1921); Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1933). Bloomfield had published an earlier book, *An Introduction to the Study of Language* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1914), which had not aimed at theoretical or methodological originality. On Sapir, see also Regna Darnell, *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁴ J Milton Cowan, "The Whimsical Bloomfield," *Historiographia Linguistica* 14/1-2 (1987), 23-37. To forestall any confusion to which the article's title may give rise: in 1988 I asked Cowan, the recipient of the letter in question, whether Bloomfield might have been in "whimsical" mode when making the comment about Saussure's influence. Cowan, who knew Bloomfield well, was certain that it was made in earnest.

¹⁵ Bronisław Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," supplement (pp. 451-510) to C. K. Ogden & I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923).

3 Saussure and the modernism of the *Cours de linguistique générale*

Saussure himself was an unconventional figure in many respects.¹⁶ He became famous as a linguist when, shortly after his twenty-first birthday and before having received any academic degree, he published his *Mémoire* on the primitive vowel system in the Indo-European languages.¹⁷ This book proposed a radical rethink of the reconstructed vowel system of the original Indo-European mother language, before its speakers undertook the *Völkerwanderung* that would leave them spread them from the easternmost frontier of Slavic and Indic-speaking Asia to the westernmost coastal reaches of Celtic and Romance-speaking Europe.

The message of the *Mémoire* was: Forget uniformitarianism, the methodological stricture that forbids positing entities or processes in the past for which no direct counterparts are observable in the present. Consider not what the prehistoric vowels sounded like, but how the sound *system* functioned, *qua* system. That was an important first step in the modernist direction – aesthetic as well as methodological – of what, fifty years later, would start to be called structuralism. That happened long after Saussure's death: he never used the term. In fact, for the rest of his life he would never publish anything nearly so ambitious or so attention-getting as the *Mémoire*; as noted above, the *Cours* was posthumously assembled and issued.

For his doctoral thesis from the University of Leipzig, he chose a much more limited topic, a particular structure (the genitive absolute) in a single language, Sanskrit.¹⁸ In the course of his research he found it increasingly difficult to sweep under the rug the sort of thing that lies beneath every linguist's rug: the failure of forms and meanings to match up in a perfectly systematic way. Previous grammars of Sanskrit had assumed that the genitive absolute construction must have come about in connection with the basic meaning of the genitive case, viz. possession. But this required some fancy footwork to explain, since the Sanskrit genitive absolute construction, like the Latin ablative absolute, had no obvious link to possession, instead expressing "in spite of." It appeared to Saussure that nothing inherent to the genitive endings led them to be used in this way. Rather, simply their *difference* in form from other case endings sufficed to signal this particular usage.

That would become another cornerstone of his conception of what a language is: a system of differences. To put it more fully, a system in which every element is a value derived from its difference vis-à-vis every other element. Over the thirty-three years of his career after the doctorate, Saussure published some two dozen articles, all of them historical linguistic studies. He wrote but never published material on "synchronic" matters, his conception of how a language system operates at a given point in time. The reason he did not publish any of this material was not that linguistics was not yet ready for his modernist conception – it may well have been – but that Saussure himself was crippled by a perfectionism so severe that nothing he wrote on the subject could meet his self-imposed standards of logical consistency and verbal clarity.

He did however include synchronic aspects of language in his lectures, starting already in Paris in the 1880s, where he was employed to teach Gothic and Old High German at the École Pratique des

¹⁶ See John E. Joseph, *Saussure* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles indo-européennes* (Leipzig: printed by B. G. Teubner, 1879).

¹⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, *De l'emploi du génitif absolu en sanscrit* (Genève: Imprimerie Jules-Guillaume Fick, 1881).

Hautes Études. In 1891 he left Paris to return home, taking up a Chair of Sanskrit and the History and Comparison of Indo-European Languages at the University of Geneva. Sixteen years later he was given the additional responsibility of lecturing on general linguistics, following the retirement of a colleague. Saussure did not think much of general linguistics as a subject, believing that its principles were best learned by studying texts in a particular language in depth. Struggling to find appropriate subject matter for his lectures, he dug out, and gradually expanded, his old ideas on the synchronic functioning of language systems. When the *Cours* was published in 1916 it was these ideas that made the greatest impact.

The *Cours* is often said to have replaced nineteenth-century historical inquiry with the synchronic analysis of present-day languages. This is partly inaccurate: Saussure did indeed want to reform historical linguistics, by reorienting it toward a “diachronic” approach (his neologism) that would look at language evolution not in terms of atomistic elements changing through time, but as a series of complete systems in which, at any given time (synchronically), every element is connected to every other. At each stage, the language is a socially-shared system of signs, where each sign is an arbitrary but inseparable conjunction of two mental elements, an acoustic image (or “signifier”) and a concept (or “signified”) – though here Saussure was not claiming to teach anything new, just repeating aspects of the *grammaire générale* tradition that he himself had been taught in the schools of Geneva in the 1870s. Again, each signifier and each signified was a value derived from its difference vis-à-vis every other signifier and signified with which it existed in a paradigmatic or syntagmatic relationship. This idea, fundamental to British associationist psychology,¹⁹ was known to Saussure through various sources, but its particular importance for language was driven home to him through his analysis of the Sanskrit genitive absolute, as explained above.

The historical linguistics which Saussure believed needed reforming had reached its pinnacle of scientific *éclat* with the “Neogrammarian manifesto” published by two lecturers at the University of Leipzig, Brugmann and Osthoff, shortly before Saussure’s arrival there as a student in the autumn of 1876.²⁰ Theirs was a developmental historicism in which the evolution of languages, “insofar as it is mechanical,” as they put it, was to be explained by sound changes which followed “laws” so powerful that they admitted of no exceptions. Of course, an escape clause was already built in through the “insofar as it is mechanical”: for some changes were *not* mechanical, but occurred through the drawing of analogies, which demanded a semi-conscious mental process (rather than just the acoustic and articulatory processes that drove mechanical change).

4 Reducing meaning: Jones

In the study of language, we do not have to look far to find an empirical approach that arose as a methodologically modernist alternative to developmental historicism.²¹ Advances in sound recording made great strides possible in phonetics, that study of the acoustics and articulation of speech

¹⁹ See John E. Joseph, *Language, Mind and Body: A Conceptual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁰ Hermann Osthoff & Karl Brugman, preface to *Morphologische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen* 1 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1878), iii–xx. Despite the order of names Brugmann (as he later spelled his surname) was the lead author.

²¹ See Mark Bevir, “Political Studies as Narrative and Science, 1880-2000,” *Political Studies* 54 (2006), 583-606.

sounds which Saussure had advocated keeping out of historical inquiry in favor of working out the mental system by which the elements of language were organized in the speaker's mind. This is not to say that Saussure was against phonetics: he knew the literature and made use of phonetic insights when it suited his argumentative purposes. But he thought that phonetics had its own place in the understanding of speech, *parole*, which should not be confused with that of phonology, the study of mental sound systems, which pertained to the study of language, *langue*. Paris became the centre for the study of phonetics, along with Henry Sweet's Oxford, and soon followed by Marburg in Germany, a number of Scandinavian universities, and then, with Jones, London.

The diachronic approach as envisioned by Saussure offered an alternative "linguistic" modernism to acoustical-articulatory phonetic "speech" modernism. Indeed, sorting out the distinction between language and speech (*langue*, *langage*, *parole*) is one of the first tasks undertaken in the *Cours*, along with clarifying the roles of diachronic and synchronic inquiry. For Saussure, speech is the utterances we produce through the socially-shared, mental system of language. Recording and analysing utterances can tell us a great deal about speech, but not directly about language, which it is the first business of linguistics to comprehend. In a way, Saussure's linguistics is a hybrid between the developmental historicism represented by earlier Neogrammarian historical linguistics, and the modernist empiricism represented by the new acoustical-articulatory phonetics, which had been established as the modern approach to language study in Britain in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Especially significant in this regard was the work of Sweet, who combined traditional historical philology with an intense interest in the description of the sounds of English, in part for the applied purposes of language teaching. After Sweet's death, Jones assumed the mantle of Britain's leading phonetician. He was appointed to a chair at the University of London in 1921. At the more conservative Oxford, Sweet had never risen above the rank of reader.

Jones took up a key concept that Saussure had used in his *Mémoire*: that of phonemes, the sound-units that constitute one level of the language system. Jones played a key role in refining the concept of the phoneme into its later, definitive form, as the minimal sound-unit capable of distinguishing meaning in a language.²² But as a phonetician Jones was not inclined to follow Saussure in imagining the phoneme as having, like any signifier, a purely *mental* reality. Instead, Jones linked phonemes to a sort of idealized articulation, most famously with his "cardinal vowels," a concept-*cum*-technique of pronouncing vowels at their extreme limits to try to define their space and capture their essence.

Jones's work was greatly respected in American universities, but its importance seemed more marginal than in Britain. At least since the advent of universal education in the 1860s and 1870s, American linguistic education had been more grammar-oriented, where British linguistic education was more pronunciation-oriented. In both countries, social class was indexed and performed through one's consonants and vowels and intonation patterns, less consciously and perhaps therefore more powerfully than through grammar and vocabulary. But it mattered less in America, just because social class boundaries were that much more permeable.

²² His crowning work was Daniel Jones, *The Phoneme: Its Nature and Use* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Son, 1950), though his reputation had been established decades earlier with numerous articles and books, of which the most widely known was *An Outline of English Phonetics* (Leipzig & Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1918), surprisingly published in Germany during the war, though from the second edition of 1922 on by Heffer in Cambridge.

Jones's work was always class-coded just beneath the surface, in a linguistic space that had developed an ever more precise class coding over the course of the long nineteenth century. The American linguists, led by Sapir and Bloomfield, inhabited a linguistic space in which the coding was more sensitive to class mobility, to massive immigration, and of course to race, in a period of overt segregation in the South and more subtle segregation in the North. British people heard in each other's vowels whether their ancestors had come before or after 1066 and whether they had paid fiefs or received them. Americans heard where they or their parents had come from, which also gave away their religious or sectarian affiliations; and in their grammar, they heard how far they had gone in their schooling. That atmosphere was perhaps more receptive to the concept of the sound system as meaning-based.

In any case, working out the exact nature of the phoneme was at the core of the debate among American linguists for some four decades. Behind it lay another, even more fundamental debate, about the nature of meaning itself. Each of the linguists discussed here was compelled, with the impetus to be modern, to find a route out of the "meaning trap," by which I mean the weight of expectation that they as scholars of language would contribute to what has always been the great problem of language: pinning down what words and texts really mean, in the face of the all too apparent reality of ambiguity and conflicting interpretation. Saussure's route had been to distill meaning down to just signification, which was the linguist's business, leaving it to philosophers and psychologists to deal with how signs relate to things or ideas. Jones likewise declined to be concerned with matters of reference; but rather than offer a theory of signs, he would simply not acknowledge that meaning was problematic.

5 Mechanizing meaning: Bloomfield

Arguments about meaning had begun opening a way into linguistic and philosophical modernism in the pre-War period, when a key Anglo-American exchange took place between Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912), founder of Signifys, and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), whose theory of semiotics was developed and transmitted mainly through his correspondence with Welby.²³ She was present too at the birth of analytic philosophy at Cambridge, acting as a gadfly to Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), and mentor to the young C. K. Ogden.²⁴ But Russell, and eventually Ogden, became frustrated in part with her lack of modernity – hardly surprising, since she was thirty-five years older than Russell and fifty-two years older than Ogden, and given too the only partly hidden religious impetus behind her work. Still, hers was a rational religiosity, making it more scientifically palatable than what was widely perceived as the crypto-mysticism of Freudian psychoanalysis.

A few years after Welby's death in 1912 an epistemological and methodological revolution, or rather schism, took place in psychology and other empirically based human sciences about the possibility of

²³ See *Semiotic and Signifys: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. by Charles S. Hardwick (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1977); Susan Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding: Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signifys Movement* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009); and John E. Joseph, "Meaning in the Margins: Victoria Lady Welby and Signifys," *Times Literary Supplement* no. 5686 (23 March 2012), 14-15.

²⁴ See James McElvenny, *Meaning in the Age of Modernism: C. K. Ogden and His Contemporaries*, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Department of English, 2013.

knowing the thoughts of another person. The behaviorism of John B. Watson (1878-1958) seems by biographical accounts to have had an anti-religious impetus, a rejection of his strict Southern Baptist upbringing.²⁵ It was counter-Freudian in its rejection of anything “mental,” where Freud, on the contrary, multiplied the minds an individual possesses. Yet, on the other hand, both Watson and Freud were on the trail of the animal nature of man, in Watson’s case taking inspiration from Pavlov and other animal psychologists. Just as phonetics represented the *nec plus ultra* of empiricism in the study of speech, behaviorism did the same in the study of human action.

Bloomfield was the first linguist to take behaviorism seriously, starting, as it happens, with his 1923 review of Saussure’s *Cours*.²⁶ Here he reinterpreted Saussure’s signifiers as “signals,” and in an article of 1927 he would complete the reinterpretation by suggesting that Saussure should have dispensed with signifier and signified altogether and spoken instead of stimulus and response.²⁷ I have discussed elsewhere how useful this sort of “misreading” is as evidence of the epistemological stance of a reader such as Bloomfield;²⁸ it is though not altogether clear whether Bloomfield was trying to say that Saussure ought to have been a behaviorist, or really was one deep down: a behaviorist *manqué*. In any case, the core of Bloomfield’s linguistic behaviorism was its rejection of anything mentalistic. To analyse language in terms of mental categories was, for Bloomfield, to enter into metaphysics, and modern science had to confine itself to the physical, or as Bloomfield preferred to put it, the mechanical. For Bloomfield, linguistic signification needed to be analysed in terms of observable actions or things that stimulate a person to speak; the utterance itself; and the observable actions that occur in response to the utterance.

Adherents of mentalistic psychology believe that they can avoid the difficulty of defining meanings, because they believe that, prior to the utterance of a linguistic form, there occurs within the speaker a non-physical process, a *thought, concept, image, feeling, act of will*, or the like, and that the hearer, likewise, upon receiving the sound-waves, goes through an equivalent or correlated mental process... For the mentalist, language is *the expression of ideas, feelings, or volitions*.

The mechanist does not accept this solution. He believes that *mental images, feelings*, and the like are merely popular terms for various bodily movements [...].²⁹

Bloomfield did not refuse entirely to speak about meaning, as some later neo-Bloomfieldians tried to do. But his behaviorist commitments constrained how far he could elaborate the meaning of “meaning” as traditionally understood, and that it was the assumed goal of linguistic analysis to pin down. Meaning remained central to Bloomfield’s method, as the criterion for identifying phonemes, but as a matter of pure difference – which is probably what he meant in saying that Saussure’s influence is on every page of *Language*. Bloomfield, like Saussure, did not try to analyse what meaning is, beyond the internal link of a signifier and a signified, each identified through difference from every other of the same type.

²⁵ See Kerry W. Buckley, *Mechanical Man: John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).

²⁶ Leonard Bloomfield, rev. of Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (2nd ed.), *Modern Language Journal* 8 (1923), 317-319.

²⁷ Leonard Bloomfield, “On Recent Work in General Linguistics,” *Modern Philology* 25 (1927), 211-230.

²⁸ Joseph, *From Whitney to Chomsky*, pp. 133-143.

²⁹ Bloomfield, *Language*, p. 142.

6 Culturalizing meaning: Sapir

In the same year as Bloomfield reviewed the *Cours*, Sapir reviewed *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards.³⁰ He was able to read it with particular devotion, during a summer in which he was laid up in hospital with a broken leg. His very positive review of the book marks a turning point in his views about the relationship of language to thought and culture. In previous work he had treated a language as an anthropological key to unlocking the secret recesses of the culture that speaks it: "Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations."³¹ From this point on his "magic key" outlook will be tempered by a distrust of the "metaphysical garbage" embedded in languages, a concern which he took away from his reading of Ogden and Richards. For them, all languages are saturated with "word magic" that is a residue of their prehistoric, pre-rational origins, and that create obstacles to logical thinking for their speakers.

Every intelligent person knows that words delude as much as they help [...] And yet few accept with due cheer and conviction the notorious failure of a given universe of speech-symbols, a language, to correspond to the universe of phenomena, physical and mental. [...]

Messrs. Ogden and Richards [...] make it clear, as no philologist has ever quite made it clear, why an understanding of the nature of speech is a philosophic essential, why every epistemology and every system of logic that does not subject speech, its necessary expressive medium, to a searching critique is built upon the sands, is sooner or later snared in the irrelevances of the medium.³²

This is the start of the discourse that would become known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and it represents possibly the most significant Anglo→American influence in twentieth-century linguistics.³³

The impact of *The Meaning of Meaning* in various branches of thought is coming to be recognized in recent work following a long period of relative neglect. Much of the book is historical in nature, with Ogden and Richards resuming and reviewing attempts at understanding the nature of meaning in language from ancient times onward. When they come to Saussure, they reject his conception of the linguistic sign out of hand, treating it as almost perverse for not including referents, things in the world that words designate, as part of linguistic signification.

Unfortunately this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of

³⁰ Edward Sapir, "An Approach to Symbolism," *The Freeman* 7 (22 Aug. 1923), 572-573.

³¹ Sapir, *Language*, p. 220.

³² Sapir, "An Approach to Symbolism," p. 572.

³³ On the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," which neither Sapir nor Whorf ever formulated or treated as a hypothesis, and which has been subject to so many different interpretations as to defy treatment as a unitary concept, see Penny Lee, *The Whorf Theory Complex: A Critical Reconstruction* (Amsterdam & New York: John Benjamins, 1996); and Joseph, *From Whitney to Chomsky*, pp. 71-104.

verification. De Saussure, however, does not appear to have pursued the matter far enough for this defect to become obvious.³⁴

Under Lady Welby's tutelage, Ogden had become familiar with Peirce's semiotics, which, unlike Saussure's semiology, was *not* intended to be narrowly confined to linguistic signification. That is the clearest difference between Peirce and Saussure: where Peirce offers a framework embracing all signification and symbolism, visual as well as verbal, Saussure scrupulously declined to pronounce on anything outside his field of specialization as a grammarian. The borderline lay squarely between the linguistic signified and the referent. Saussure no doubt had his private views on the relationship between them, and it may well have been similar to Peirce's. But the key point for Saussure was that, whatever that relationship may be, it does not affect how signification operates within the linguistic sign. Whether the referent is an individual such as *Queen Victoria*, a category such as *dog*, an abstract idea such as *justice*, an imaginary category such as *unicorn*, a quality such as *white* or *impossible*, with each of these linguistic signs, the bond between the signifier and the signified remains the same.

But this is just what Ogden and Richards saw as being so dangerous. Where part of Saussure's modernism was the disconnect between signified and referent, their modernism lay in the ultra-rationalism of exposing word magic. They regarded the Saussurean disconnect as a surrender to pre-modern irrationalism. But Ogden and Richards did not really "get" modernism. More precisely, only Richards did, which probably had a good deal to do with their eventual split. Ogden, the senior partner, quite rightly saw his own work as a throwback to the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) of a hundred years earlier. His anachronistic tastes may have prompted his decision to include as a supplement to *The Meaning of Meaning* Malinowski's essay on "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages."

Malinowski introduces such key ideas as context of situation and phatic communion (the use of language for purely interpersonal purposes) in the course of making the very modernist argument that even the most "civilized" languages are just as run through with purely phatic utterances as the Melanesian languages he had studied, if not more so. Ogden read this as an exposé of word magic in the spirit of the rest of the book. But modernist anthropologists read it differently: not as a call to rid European languages of phatic verbiage, but a celebration of how we are not and never will be the purely rational and utilitarian creatures Bentham-Ogden imagined. We are much more than that. It is unsurprising that this appendix, received as ground-breaking and daring, stole the thunder from a book that otherwise felt more than a bit stodgy.

The selections from Sapir's music and poetry criticism included in his *Selected Writings* show us a man attuned to the art being created around him, but not art reflecting the modernist aesthetic, of which he seems unaware.³⁵ He had studied musical composition with the American Romantic composer Edward MacDowell (1860-1908), and the poetry he wrote was reminiscent of the pre-modernist "Georgians" of the second decade of the twentieth century, whom he admired. Yet his appreciation of Native American cultures was unreserved, and gives him some claim to modernism, particularly with his article "The Psychological Reality of Phonemes," the very title of which was a

³⁴ Ogden & Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 8.

³⁵ Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*, ed. by David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949).

thinly-veiled challenge to Bloomfield.³⁶ In it Sapir gives accounts of cases where he, as the “expert” observer, made phonological analyses which he was later persuaded to change by informants who were themselves insiders to the culture he was studying. They had a strong intuitive sense of what was the “same” sound on the mental-phonological level of the phoneme, even though that phoneme might sound different depending on what preceded or followed it.³⁷ For Sapir, the cultural insider has an expertise which trumps the modern scientist’s empirical observational power.³⁸ That extends all the way down to the “meaning” by which phonemes are determined.

7 Complexifying meaning: Firth

The linguist who latched most immediately onto Malinowski’s framework was J. R. Firth, for whom context of situation became the key concept in a revisionary approach to meaning that made his linguistics distinctive. It also contributed to the difficulties others had in comprehending it. For Firth, Saussure was headed in the right direction, but his project needed to be pushed further. Linguistic meaning is not determined by things in the world – but more than that, even signification within the linguistic sign is context-dependent. A language is indeed a system in which everything connects to everything else – but more than that, it is a polysystem, a system of systems, levels, layers that need to be analysed separately despite being fully interlocked.

After WWII, Firth’s elevation from lecturer in Daniel Jones’s department to occupying the first chair of linguistics in the UK began a schism-*cum*-rivalry between the two, considerably more intense than that between Sapir and Bloomfield. Firth’s determination to create a linguistics that was methodologically modernist drew him to Malinowski, while his equally strong determination to create an original approach of his own led him to resist ideas from across the Atlantic. Direct resistance can itself constitute an exchange of sorts. R. E. Asher, who studied under both Jones and Firth, says that Firth was very conscious of differentiating his linguistics from American linguistics, and that he was the kind of man who took pains to make clear that he was widely read yet had something original to offer.³⁹ Asher recalls him speaking rarely of American linguistics, but often of continental linguistics, with Saussure coming up in nearly every lecture.

In 1950 Firth wrote that “Nowadays, professional linguists can almost be classified by using the name of de Saussure. There are various possible groupings: Saussureans, anti-Saussureans, post-

³⁶ Sapir’s article was originally published in French, as “La réalité psychologique des phonèmes,” in the *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 30 (1933), 247-265, a special issue with invited contributions all focussed on language. The English version, “The Psychological Reality of Phonemes,” was first published in Sapir’s *Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*, pp. 46-60.

³⁷ In English, for example, we have a single phoneme /p/, which is aspirated, that is, pronounced [p^h], except after s-. So, on the phonetic level, the [p^h] of *pin* sounds very different from the unaspirated [p] of *spin*, yet speakers of English “know” that they are the same sound – i.e., the same phoneme – and that knowledge reflects, or simply is, the phoneme’s “psychological reality.”

³⁸ This may seem not to sit well with the metaphysical garbage worries of the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.” But Sapir’s writings on that subject were always part of an effort to promote linguistics and recruit people to study it, as a way of coming to an understanding of the language-thought nexus in both its magic key and metaphysical garbage dimensions.

³⁹ R. E. Asher interviewed by John E. Joseph, Edinburgh, 27 January 2013. See also J. R. Firth, “Atlantic Linguistics,” in *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Saussureans, or non-Saussureans.”⁴⁰ He considered Saussure’s conception of *langue* to contain certain fundamental errors, two of which were that it abstracted the language system away from context, and that it located it in the mind of the speaker (“psychological structuralism”). Firth strived toward a concept of language as something located not within people (whether as individuals or social groups), but within *what people do*, the context of situation, borrowing Malinowski’s term. Unlike pragmaticians such as J. L. Austin, who saw language as inseparable from the actions people perform, Firth did think of language as something apart, a particular “form of human living” (close to Wittgenstein’s late view of language as a *Lebensform*, a “form of life”) that needed to be analysed in its own terms, though never separately from the context in which it occurred.⁴¹

Jones’s work, with its treatment of meaning as something unproblematic that phonemes could differentiate, was readily absorbed by American linguists. Even if they shunted his cardinal vowels aside as not useful for their purposes, they embraced the International Phonetic Alphabet project, in conjunction with which he had developed the cardinal vowels. Firth, on the other hand, seemed impenetrable. He had published two introductory books on linguistics which were elementary when compared with those of Sapir and Bloomfield,⁴² and had embarked on a series of papers in which he presented his polysystemic complexifications briefly and sketchily. Only those who had studied directly with Firth appeared to understand them fully and appreciate their import, and they invariably came away considering Firth a genius. His essential difference vis-à-vis Jones, Bloomfield, and Sapir was that, where they strove to find the simplest solution to the problems posed by language, Firth started from the assumption that language is a massively complex phenomenon, and that its analysis was bound to reflect and embody that complexity.

He was invited to take part in the Linguistic Society of America’s semi-annual Linguistic Institute in the summer of 1948, and that ought to have been the occasion for the mid-century Anglo-American exchange that could have set linguistics on a markedly different track for the second half of the century. But it was not a success: the ground had not been well enough prepared, Firth was not given enough time to develop his lectures fully and explain (if he himself actually realized it) that his whole epistemological aesthetic, as it were, was based on the opposite set of assumptions from the American one. The American linguists, students of Sapir’s until his death in 1939, then students of Bloomfield’s, went away shaking their heads in incomprehension.⁴³ One of those students, Rulon Wells (1919-2008), had recently published the first analysis of Saussure’s *Cours* by an American linguist since Bloomfield’s review.⁴⁴ Another student, Zellig Harris, went on to direct the doctoral thesis of Noam Chomsky, whose work would, starting in the early 1960s, spur on the next great revolution over the linguistic treatment of meaning, while simultaneously reversing the tide of what had until then been mainly Anglo→American influence.

⁴⁰ J. R. Firth, “Personality and Language in Society,” in *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*, p. 179. See also E. F. K. Koerner, “J. R. Firth and the *Cours de linguistique générale*,” in *Linguistic Historiography: Projects and Prospects* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999).

⁴¹ J. R. Firth, *Selected Papers, 1952-59*, ed. by F. L. Palmer (London & Bloomington: Longmans and Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 206.

⁴² J. R. Firth, *Speech* (London: Benn’s Sixpenny Library); *The Tongues of Men* (London: Watts & Co., 1937).

⁴³ See W. P. Lehmann, review of D. Terence Langendoen, *The London School of Linguistics: A Study of the Linguistic Theories of B. Malinowski and J. R. Firth* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), *Romance Philology* 25/4 (1972), 421-427.

⁴⁴ Rulon S. Wells III, “De Saussure’s System of Linguistics,” *Word* 3 (1947), 1-31.

8 Aftermath and conclusion

Chomsky famously went to war against the behaviorism of the preceding generation, taking as his proxy target not a linguist but a psychologist, B. F. Skinner, who had created the opportunity for Chomsky by publishing a book entitled *Verbal Behavior*.⁴⁵ That Skinner's approach to meaning in the book is actually closer to Firth's than to Bloomfield's comes as a surprise to linguists, who rarely read Skinner, mistakenly assuming that they know what his book is about from Chomsky's review of it. The review is really directed against the neo-Bloomfieldian old guard of linguistics, some of whom, led by George L. Trager (1906-1992), had tried to push meaning out of linguistic analysis completely.⁴⁶ Where meaning was concerned, Chomsky actually continued Bloomfield's project of mechanizing it, but this time with an overtly *mental* mechanism: a mental grammar, built upon a foundation that is innate and universal, and that serves not only to produce utterances but to assign an interpretation to utterances which are heard. Chomsky pointed out that mastery of a language also involves "the ability to identify deviant sentences" (7), such as *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, and "on occasion, to impose an interpretation on them," "if a context can be constructed in which an interpretation can be imposed."⁴⁷ The poet John Hollander famously constructed such a context in "Coiled Alizarine (for Noam Chomsky)" (from *The Night Mirror*, 1971):

Curiously deep, the slumber of crimson thoughts:
While breathless, in stodgy viridian,
Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

This is a clear case of imposing an interpretation as Chomsky defines it. But no interpretation needs to be imposed on a sentence like *Revolutionary new ideas appear infrequently*. The speaker's mental grammar assigns it a structural description which indicates that it is perfectly well-formed. Interpretation then proceeds automatically out of the mental grammar.

We thus have two completely different mechanisms of interpretation, one for well-formed and the other for deviant sentences. The first is automatic and straightforward: Jonesian. The second is complex to the point of being Firthian: the grammar assigns a structural description that indicates the manner of its deviation from perfect well-formedness, after which, "an interpretation can often be imposed by virtue of formal relations to sentences of the generated language."⁴⁸ But the interpretation does not follow directly or automatically out of those "formal relations." If they did, the word *imposed* would not be applicable to them. The interpretation of the well-formed sentence is generated by the grammar, but that of the deviant sentence has to be imposed *by someone*, John Hollander for instance.

With the emergence in the 1960s of Chomsky's universalism, grounded initially in his reading of Saussure though soon looking back atavistically to the eighteenth and eventually the seventeenth

⁴⁵ Noam Chomsky, review of B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior*, *Language* 35 (1959), 26-58. See also John E. Joseph, "How Behaviourist Was *Verbal Behavior*?", in *From Whitney to Chomsky*, 169-180.

⁴⁶ Gregory Radick, "The Unmaking of a Modern Synthesis: Noam Chomsky, Charles Hockett, and the Politics of Behaviorism, 1955-1965," *Isis*, in press, makes a strong case that the neo-Bloomfieldian Charles F. Hockett (1916-2000) was Chomsky's principal target.

⁴⁷ Noam Chomsky, *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), p. 7

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

centuries,⁴⁹ more direct conflicts emerged. One of these was with Firth's disciple M. A. K. Halliday, championing a "social semiotic" inspired on one level by Saussure, and on another by Marx.⁵⁰ But no dialogue was possible between Chomsky and Halliday, the Atlantic gap having only widened since Firth's failure to win over the Linguistic Institute in 1948. The much more troublesome conflict for Chomsky was the one that opened up between him and the most talented of his own first generation of students, the "generative semanticists," who argued that an account of language must start from meaning, where Chomsky's interpretative semantics insisted that it start from linguistic form, off of which meaning is read as explained above.⁵¹ It took over a decade for him to recover his position as the leading American linguist of the second half of the twentieth century, a position which however he never relinquished, at least until the century ended.

Halliday and his many influential students have carried on the Firthian tradition, mostly outside the USA, under the names of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. The latter intersects with post-structuralist and radical historicist approaches that mainstream linguistics, a very conservative field, has succeeded in keeping marginalized. In the longer term, I believe, the field has paid the price for not heeding these critiques. If Bevir (2006) poses as the essential question for political studies, "How did we get to be so skeptical?," the equivalent question for linguistics is, "How did we fail to be skeptical enough?." The answer, I suspect, lies in a preoccupation with internecine struggles, from Jones vs. Firth to the "linguistics wars" between generative and interpretative semanticists that resulted in the solidifying of doctrines into dogma.

This paper has obviously not attempted a full history of the period, even where the treatment of meaning in linguistics is concerned. That would require, for example, bringing in a figure such as Stephen Ullmann (1914-1976), whose work paved the way for semantics to re-enter the mainstream of British, then of American linguistics.⁵² It might consider the work of the Oxford philologist J. R. R. Tolkien, including his totally anti-modernist project of writing stories in which he claimed to start from a name and to let a story unfold from it. This turned everything about the modern analysis of meaning on its head – and it eventually turned around the economy of Anglo-American exchanges, if we include Tolkien's novelistic *œuvre*, grounded in his Germano-Celtic philological learning, as part of linguistics broadly conceived.

Finally, perhaps the closest thing to a genuine Anglo-American exchange occurred with the modernist project of creating an international auxiliary language that, unlike the earlier Volapük and Esperanto, would be scientifically based. This directly united Sapir, who contributed important theoretical work to the project,⁵³ with Ogden and Richards, who had created Basic English as an offshoot of *The Meaning of Meaning*. But Basic English and the larger project it was part of were

⁴⁹ Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Study in the History of Rationalist Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). See also John E. Joseph, "Chomsky's Atavistic Revolution (with a little help from his enemies)," in *Chomskyan (R)evolutions*, ed. by Douglas A. Kibbee, (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2010), 1-18.

⁵⁰ See for example M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as a Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

⁵¹ See Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵² See Stephen Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1951); *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

⁵³ See Edward Sapir, "Memorandum on the Problem of an International Auxiliary Language," *Romanic Review* 16 (1925), 244-256; *Totality* (Language Monographs 6, published with the support of the International Auxiliary Language Association, Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1930).

consigned to the rubbish bin of history following the satirical depiction of Basic English as Newspeak by another figure whose place in the history of linguistic thought has been underestimated: George Orwell. This I mention with trepidation, for, if Ogden and Basic English represent an anti-modernism that harks back to Jeremy Bentham, what does that make Orwell? An anti-anti-modernist who is also anti-modernist in his own way? Whatever answers we give to these questions will be tautological, since they depend on just how we define modernism – leaving us precisely where we started, with the impulse to break through such tautologies with a scientific method for determining linguistic meaning. It is a naïve impulse. The only method for making meanings determinate would be, not a scientific but a political one, specifically a totalitarian one, Newspeak, which it took Orwell's particular genius to comprehend.